

Posted by u/SpacePaladin15 7 months ago

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The Human Word 'Sacrifice'

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Esteemed members of the Galactic Senate,

I understand why some of you oppose adding the Terran United Nations to the Council. When I was young, I too dismissed the humans as little more than tribal primitives. Their finest feat of engineering was that scrap metal cylinder they stuck a warp drive to and sent to Alpha Centauri. Actually, when you think about it, it's a miracle that that clunker flew at all. You wonder what they could possibly add to our regiment, or if you can trust them. But perhaps a small anecdote from my time out in the great expanse will change your minds.

I was working for a luxurious cruise ship, where we ferried wealthy passengers across the galaxy. There were many who would pay a hefty price to view the radiant colors of a nebula up close and personal. And of course, we stocked up on the finest delicacies and intoxicants. We had enough talem cakes to feed an army and enough rinx capsules to sedate a Ksion beast.

We were a bit short staffed during the height of the travel season one year. Even offering generous pay and over the top benefits, it was difficult to find anyone willing to be off planet for such long stretches of time. Pressed to find a solution, we reached out to employment offices on the most recently discovered planet, Earth.

Before we knew it, we had dozens of applicants; the human civilians were all too eager to venture to the stars. After careful review, they picked out the best four candidates and hired them: their names were Mark, Terry, Amber, and Sian. You could say our management took advantage of their enthusiasm. The wages given to the humans were much lower than other staffers. I asked Mark why they would work for so little, and he just laughed and said, "It's not about the money." But I digress.

The humans were the subject of many snide remarks among the rest of the crew. They didn't have the best reputation: they were said to be clumsy, naïve, and undisciplined. This was not helped by the fact that Mark and Terry were found passed out in the dining lounge on their first night on the ship. Apparently, they had crushed up rinx capsules and snorted them. That was a new one.

I steered clear of them for the most part at first, but curiosity got the better of me. They were more friendly and more intelligent than the bawdy jokes would have you believe. We shared stories about our cultures; what strange rituals they had for their deceased! I'd never heard of a species leaving gifts for corpses, and I couldn't fathom why they would do it.

Eventually, we began to connect on a more personal level. I came to particularly enjoy the company of the one called Amber, and perhaps even fancied her. We would eat breakfast together in the mornings and watch Terran movies together in the evenings.

What little break time we had was shared almost exclusively in each other's company.

So as the ship's voyage came to a conclusion and the passengers disembarked, I felt a sharp pang of disappointment. The realization that we would be separated in a matter of hours was difficult to accept. All that remained was the routine trip to the nearest Federation service port for mandatory inspection. I decided to join the humans in the recreation center for one last game of "Uno" before we docked.

Little did I know that that short trip would be anything but routine. The official accident investigation concluded that a coolant pipe in the warp chamber had burst. The overheating had led to catastrophic failure of the anti-matter containment field, which in turn caused a reactor meltdown. But, at the time, nobody knew what had happened, just that the ship had suddenly taken a nosedive over an uninhabited mining colony.

There was no time to make a break for the escape shuttles. The gravitational force of our steep descent threw me against the wall and rendered me incapable of movement. Well, I thought, if this is the end, I just hope it will end quickly. I remember locking eyes with Amber for a few moments before the pressure knocked me out.

The next thing I knew, I was being dragged across a dusty field, away from the burning wreck of our ship. I spotted pale, fleshy hands wrapped around my torso, and felt relief wash over me as I realized who it was. Amber had survived! But my relief turned to horror as I looked around and did not see anyone else emerging from the wreckage.

The grim fact that we were the only two survivors was cemented as the ship exploded in a massive blue fireball moments later. The heat was so intense that I felt it sear my face, despite being out of the blast's immediate vicinity. Amber dropped me in shock, eyes and mouth drawn wide in what I'm guessing was the human expression of horror. We both knew there was no way the crewmates trapped inside the wreckage had survived that.

I could only offer her my thanks for saving my life and some empty words of comfort. We watched as the flames died down, trying to process what had happened. Amber snapped out of it first, suggesting that we sift through the wreckage and try to salvage whatever we could. Luckily enough, we uncovered an escape shuttle with only minor damage; there was food and water tucked away inside.

Amber did the best she could to fix up the shuttle, and I couldn't help but admire her handiwork. Humans are much craftier, much more knowledgeable in engineering, than they let on, that's for sure. She was able to get its systems running and its engine operational in the span of a day.

I was ready to set off then and there. We could plot a course across the system that would take us in range of the nearest communications relay. The shuttle lacked FTL capabilities, so it would take months to reach its destination. But the promise of returning home eventually was good enough for me.

So why did Amber look so sad? I asked her what was wrong, and she gave me a half-hearted smile.

"There are only enough supplies on board for one of us," she said.

Her demeanor made sense to me now, and my tentacles trembled with sadness. I would take no pleasure in fighting her for the vessel either. We were close friends, but this was a matter of survival. Yet, I wondered why she did not just take off without me while I slept. It would have been the smartest move.

"So I've decided that you should take the ship. Just activate the distress beacon once you're in range of comms and you'll be fine," she continued.

I stared at her in disbelief. It made absolutely no sense, that she would choose my survival over her own. The food and water in the shuttle was all that was still intact after the crash; remaining on the planet would condemn her to certain death. But she said it in such a matter-of-fact way, as though it was the most logical choice. I almost felt compelled to argue with her for making such a foolish offer.

"What about you? You would be stuck here," I pointed out.

Amber met my eyes. "I'll be here, waiting for your return. Don't you forget about me, alright? Safe travels, Fa'el."

There was a finality in her voice. I could tell that she knew she would not see my return, but it was a lie that seemed to be crafted to comfort us both. I boarded the vessel and lifted off before she could change her mind.

By the time I got word back to Federation command, it was far too late for Amber. A rescue team was dispatched, just in case, but I knew it was futile to hope they would find anything but corpses. The incident became sector-wide news; some of you may have seen the coverage. It's not every day a state-of-the-art vessel crashes and leaves just a sole survivor. I wasn't really interested in talking to any reporters. The grief and the trauma I experienced made my newfound celebrity status trivial to me.

Word, of course, got back to the Terran United Nations as well. Their government requested my presence at a public hearing, and feeling that I owed a great debt to Amber's people, I acquiesced. After receiving my testimony, the Terrans requested permission to build a memorial to the dead at the crash site. The Council was confused by this sentimentality, but approved it nonetheless.

I wanted to understand the humans, and I searched for those answers for a long time. I still ask myself why Amber chose to save me all the time. There was something about the look in her eye that haunts me. The way she hadn't hesitated at all.

I learned of the human word 'sacrifice.' They have a concept of giving up your own well-being, sometimes even your life, for others. Some may say that it is a foolish idea, but I find it quite honorable.

The humans remember those who sacrifice themselves, brand them heroes, and seek to keep their deeds alive in memory. That is why they build shrines to their deceased.

I finally visited the memorial this year, all these decades later. It consists of a simple black wall with names engraved on it in Galactic Standard. There were thirty or so people there, with myself as the only non-human in attendance. I thought back to days long gone, recalling the human girl who had been my first love.

Quietly, I pulled a vibrant orange flower from my jacket pocket and laid it by the wall. The human tradition that had once seemed so strange now seemed intuitive. The gift was not to the corpses, but to the memories they left behind. It was a tradition born of love that outlasted death itself.

Their sense of love and devotion, their capacity for good, is why I know that we can trust them. I don't think the humans can help us win the war. But they can make us a society worth fighting for.

Hello, and thank you for reading! This is my first HFY post. Feedback and constructive criticism are welcome and much appreciated!